

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 14, 2014  
Sermon Title: Convert Them, Or Bomb Them  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3

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## Ecclesiastes 3

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

*What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.*

*Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. I*

*said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?*

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It was about 1978. I was a pastor in Forest Hills, Queens, and a church member had a big party at his apartment overlooking the Long Island Expressway. He was a longtime newspaper editor with *The New York Daily News*. Halfway through the party, he gathers everybody around, and he looks directly at me and says, "The problem with you folks" (he was referring to clergy), "the problem with you folks is all you worry about are Communists. Communists this, Communists that. You see Communism everywhere. Forget it, Communism is dead. You want to worry about something? Worry about Islamic fundamentalism."

As I said, that was 1978. I didn't know what the heck he was talking about. This was long before 9/11 or the first Gulf War or the last Gulf War. Long before any of us had to know about Sunnis, Shiites, Sharia law, jihad, Wahhabism. Maybe a few of us had read the Koran in some comparative religion course in freshman year in college. But that was it. And my friend was telling me, in 1978, "You want to worry about something, worry about Islamic fundamentalism."

Then, in the '90s, I read a book by an Algerian Muslim woman journalist, threatened with death by the Islamic fundamentalists terrorizing her own country. In that book, she told of mosques in Algeria and throughout the Middle East being taken over by fundamentalist imams from Saudi Arabia and mosques being used to stockpile weapons and hide terrorists. That was 20 years ago.

Alida reminded me the other day that the teenagers in our youth groups and especially our Confirmation Class, who are 13 years old, have lived every minute of their lives with America at war. And now we are at a new war against an enemy we'd barely heard of two months ago, ISIS, today's

incarnation of the very threat my newspaper friend warned me about in 1978.

We've watched them in action all summer. It's easy enough because they love self-promotion and marketing. They videotape all those horrors: massacres and crucifixions, kidnappings and beheadings. Whatever you conceive to be the lowest of the low, that's how low they get.

This time, the enemy has made an even greater effort than usual to target Christians, the innocent, and Americans with a savagery of Biblical proportions. If we were sitting at a bar or with friends at work or watching the news on TV or at a backyard barbeque, this conversation might be easier. We could bluster and curse, vent our anger, and pound our fists.

Whatever politics we might enjoy or suffer, we could make room for war, for some show of strength, for American exceptionalism as the world's only superpower, using our superior military and technology to save the world from a truly great evil. And I don't mean any of that with even an ounce of sarcasm.

It is difficult for even the most dedicated pacifist to see the horrors of ISIS and not want to use our power to save the innocent and defeat the evil. But we're not at a bar or in our backyard. We all made the choice to come to church this morning, and we've chosen a church that believes in prayer, that loves the Scriptures, that tirelessly preaches the "Good News," that endlessly promotes God's love.

Thursday night, we actually had a nice group of people for our 9/11 prayer service. We remembered, we prayed. Sandra played a lovely Chopin piece on the piano. We read some very poignant Scriptures. One told us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem." That was written 2,700 years ago, and even way back then, Middle Eastern peace was so fragile that good people were being asked to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem."

Another Scripture proclaimed, "Christ is our peace," Christ breaks the "dividing wall of hostility," that Christ is the source of our peace in the face of every threat. For 2,000 years, Christians have been reading that Scripture, so we read it again.

Thursday night I was unusually frank, maybe too frank, as I bared my soul in the face of ISIS's great evil. I said then, and I'm saying to you today, when it comes to war and peace, the Bible is all over the place. In the first half of the Bible, the Old Testament, the great heroes are soldiers, warriors, generals, leading Israel into brutal battle: Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David,

Samson. Do yourself a favor, don't read about those guys. You might think ISIS learned a thing or two in the Bible. But, it's also true, the Bible changes, the idea of war changes, there's more emphasis on justice, on righteousness, on doing the right thing, the right way, even war.

Before you know it, we're hearing Jesus say, "love your enemies," "turn the other cheek," and he surrenders his life for the good of us all. But the Bible also tells us to "hate evil" and accept the direction of our government. By the time you finish reading the whole Bible, it starts to be confusingly clear. Christ lives at a higher level than the rest of us. He sets an example, he sets a bar so high, he sets a standard that is both inspiring and sadly mostly out of reach. We want it. We aspire to it. We believe in it. And some make it.

I read an article just this morning about an Iraqi Christian priest in Southfield, Michigan, a bishop. He was holding a crucifix in his hand, and he said, "Our faith isn't a theory. It's not a set of teachings. It's a person and we're called to be like him. When I look at this evil [ISIS], I want to be Rambo. But that won't do any good. We carry the cross for a reason." (Freedman, Samuel G. "As Iraqi Christians in U.S. Watch ISIS Advance, They See 'Slow-Motion Genocide.'" *The New York Times* 6 Sept. 2014: A14. Print.)

Just like the Bible, and like that bishop, we live in two worlds: the world we aspire to and the world we're stuck with. I'm reminded of Martin Luther's saying, probably good advice for this time of war. Luther said, "When you sin, sin boldly." In other words, sometimes you may have to do things that don't seem right, that you know aren't what God hopes for. Be bold enough to do it and humble enough to tell God you're not proud of it.

I want to stand before you this morning and be your Gandhi, your Martin Luther King, Jr., your Mother Teresa. I want to be on the side of the angels. I want to be a voice of peace. I want to be heroically and wonderfully naïve in the best sense of the word. Instead, I gave you a very real, very human Scripture, those famous verses from the Book of Ecclesiastes. You know what "Ecclesiastes" is? It's one of the Books of Wisdom, like the Book of Proverbs: stuff to live by, good advice, earthy, pithy, useful wisdom. And Ecclesiastes chapter 3 is blunt, describing the stark realities of daily life. There's the hopeful, positive, optimistic life: "a time for peace, a time for birth, a time for love, a time for gathering in togetherness, a time for mending and sewing and fixing."

Life can be so good! Alida, Marcia, and I were at Norwalk Hospital several times this week, visiting two young families, two very happy families with brand-new babies. Riley and Briggs, born of love, born into faith, born full of

hope. Next Saturday, we have two weddings, joyous celebrations of the best of human love, eternal love. Ecclesiastes says, that's life, that's real, that's true, rejoice! "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

But . . . you knew the "but" was coming, didn't you, because every good aspect of life includes the word "but." But . . . there is a "time for casting things aside, for tearing and ripping things apart, for war, for hate, and yes, for death." We don't like to hear that. We don't like to think about it. O.K., we understand the inevitability of death. We've had three funerals in the last eight days. Two of our church families had funerals for their mothers this week. We have two more funerals already scheduled for October. The reality of death is, well, reality. And some of the other verses are O.K. We know there's a time to set things aside, to be done, it's over.

But to actually admit "there is a time to hate, a time to kill, a time for war," to actually put that in the Holy Bible, to actually quote that in church . . . that's hard, that's cold, that's tough, that's human. And I'm human. I'm no Gandhi. I'm not even Mother Teresa. I'm on the really, really human side of human. When I think of Jim Foley and Stephen Sotloff and now David Haines, when I think of the Yazidi people fleeing to the mountaintop to escape slaughter, when I think of this ISIS holocaust against Christians and even other Muslims, against humans, I find my blood boiling.

I confess to you, not proudly but humbly, I confess to you that the evil of ISIS has made it all too easy for me to find "a time to hate" and to imagine "a time for war." Perhaps many of you are like me. You try to imagine what you would do, how you would react if bad things happened in your life. Would we be bold, committed, positive, courageous, sacrificial, noble, angry? Would we be fearful, worried, indecisive, hesitant, patient? Peaceful? That moment when you lose a job. That moment when the doctor looks you in the eye and says, "Cancer." That moment when world events threaten our very humanity. At that moment, will we be more Christlike? Or more humanlike?

In my life, I've taken strong stands for peace, for justice, for nonviolence. When 9/11 came, we knew that morning that we were going to war. We made a decision right then that our church would be an anchor, a true sanctuary, a place of peace, not politics, not division. We supported our troops monumentally, personally, generously. We honored their sacrifice with our Field of Flags. We sent up a thousand prayers, remembering our soldiers by name. We stayed united. And we never gave up on peace.

War is personal, not abstract. And we've kept it personal in our church this past decade. Seeing those 6,000 American flags right outside our church window (we did it three times), each one personally planted by hand in sacred ground, each one listed by name on the board. Each one meant something to us, each one a personal reminder of the costs of war. War is personal. And as we anticipate more war, we need to keep it personal. We need to remember we'll need more flags next time.

War does things. The fog of war, the chaos of war, unintended consequences here and there, collateral damage here and there. Innocents will die here and there. The costs will be huge here and there. And if it's ever over and our soldiers come home, there will be too much suicide, too much divorce, too much addiction, too much post-traumatic stress syndrome. Too much.

Some of us are old enough to remember "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," an old, irreverent show that knew how to make you squirm. At the height of the Vietnam War, this poem was read on the show, causing quite a stir, because it's true, but no one wants to hear such things in the middle of war. So I offer it now, just to remember, just to remind myself, war does things.

***The Box***  
**by Lascelles Abercrombie**

*Once upon a time, in the land of Hush-A-Bye,  
Around about the wondrous days of yore,  
They came across a kind of box  
Bound up with chains and locked with locks  
And labeled "Kindly do not touch; it's war."  
A decree was issued round about, and all with a flourish and a shout  
And a gaily colored mascot tripping lightly on before.  
Don't fiddle with this deadly box,  
Or break the chains, or pick the locks.  
And please don't ever play about with war.  
The children understood. Children happen to be good  
And they were just as good around the time of yore.  
They didn't try to pick the locks  
Or break into that deadly box.  
They never tried to play about with war.  
Mommies didn't either; sisters, aunts, grannies neither  
'Cause they were quiet, and sweet, and pretty  
In those wondrous days of yore.  
Well, very much the same as now,  
And not the ones to blame somehow*

*For opening up that deadly box of war.  
But someone did. Someone battered in the lid  
And spilled the insides out across the floor.  
A kind of bouncy, bumpy ball made up of guns and flags  
And all the tears, and horror, and death that comes with war.  
It bounced right out and went bashing all about,  
Bumping into everything in store. And what was sad and most unfair  
Was that it didn't really seem to care  
Much who it bumped, or why, or what, or for.  
It bumped the children mainly. And I'll tell you this quite plainly,  
It bumps them every day and more, and more,  
And leaves them dead, and burned, and dying  
Thousands of them sick and crying.  
'Cause when it bumps, it's really very sore.  
Now there's a way to stop the ball. It isn't difficult at all.  
All it takes is wisdom, and I'm absolutely sure  
That we can get it back into the box,  
And bind the chains, and lock the locks.  
But no one seems to want to save the children anymore.  
Well, that's the way it all appears, 'cause it's been bouncing round  
for years and years  
In spite of all the wisdom wizzed since those wondrous days of yore  
And the time they came across the box,  
Bound up with chains and locked with locks,  
And labeled "Kindly do not touch; it's war."*

So . . . "a time for war," or not? I think we all want the "or not," but we don't know how to get there. Just before I went to church on Thursday for our 9/11 prayer service, I got an e-mail from my favorite peace organization, very highly respected, deeply committed peace Christians. They didn't want war, they wanted the "or not," but they didn't know how to get there either.

My sermon title is a bad joke, a tongue-in-cheek mantra that began after 9/11. I think I first heard it from Ann Coulter regarding the Muslims. "Convert them, or bomb them." It's sort of the modern-day version of the old World War II slogan, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition." Both sayings offer two options: some sort of religious connection, or war. In other words, give God a crack at it, or we'll do it our way. In fact, that first saying, "Convert them, or bomb them," as ugly as it sounds, is not that far-fetched. That's the general approach we make with any adversary. "Convert" means to "change." So with any adversary, before you go to blows, before you go to court, before you go to war, there's at least a chance for change—a change of heart, a change of behavior, a change of policy. That's conversion. Then, if all else fails, war, by whatever means necessary.

We had a funeral yesterday, and I spoke in the first half. For the second half I sat way in the very back pew. Right in front me was a little baby girl, maybe five or six weeks old, with such a happy smile! Very animated, her little fingers and hands reaching up and out, ready to grab hold of life. I knew looking at her, as we say with all of our babies, God has a special purpose just for her. And yet, I have to tell you, sitting back there, looking at her, I realized there are so many men in ISIS and so many likeminded, who would hurt her just for being in church, who would hurt her just for being a girl. What a horrible, awful, dark thought. I wanted to slap myself after I thought it. And just saying it now makes me feel dirty.

Maybe we don't want a world where their dirty is met by my dirty, their evil is met by my evil. Maybe we don't want to have "a time for hate" and a "time for war." Maybe we can squeeze them dry, close off their oil sales, stop the flow of terrorist wannabees from Europe and our own neighborhoods, shut down the glorification of terror on the Internet, shrink their world to a rat-sized hole.

Pray hard. Pray with me. Pray against me. But pray hard, "without ceasing," the Bible says, "pray without ceasing."